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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that explored the perceptions held by aspiring teachers regarding the role, function, and responsibilities of school principals. Data were collected through interviews with four students enrolled in preservice teacher education programs leading to elementary teacher certification at a large state university. The teaching candidates demonstrated a naive understanding of principals' roles, viewing principals as existing to service their classroom work. They tended to perceive the principal as an authoritarian figure and a resource gatherer. The students did not see principals as sources of instructional leadership or professional development, nor did they conceive of themselves as participants in school decision making. Findings indicate that teachers are still being prepared to operate as technicians who focus on instruction and control of students. It is recommended that teacher-preparation programs inform aspiring teachers about their schoolwide roles and cultivate an appreciation of the larger school environment. Principals, also, should be made aware of their responsibility to socialize new teachers so that their misconceptions about principals may be dispelled. (LMI)

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DEFINING THE PRINCIPALSHIP:

EXPECTATIONS OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS

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DEFINING THE PRINCIPALSHIP:
EXPECTATIONS OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS

The fact that the role of the school principal is a critical element in determining the probable overall effectiveness of individual schools is well-established. Beginning in the 1970s with the "effective schools" research movement (Edmonds, 1979), and continuing to more recent descriptions of successful organizations, it is clear that leaders at the individual school site level have a major impact on the quality of life and the ability of the organization to deliver desired outcomes. Descriptions of the role of the principal as part of the process of promoting effectiveness and organizational success have varied greatly. For example, Dubin (1991) referred to the principal as the "chief executive officer" of the individual school, using many of the terms and concepts traditionally associated with the superintendent as the CEO of a school district. Numerous other researchers persist with the notion that the school principal serves as the instructional leader (Smith & Piele, 1989). Beck and Murphy (1993) have identified a number of other themes which have been used in the literature and in practice to describe what people assume to be the functions and duties of school principals.

While the literature is filled with references to who principals are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do, however, little is known about the perceptions held by those who are most affected by these

individuals in their schools. Descriptions of the role of the principal as a person who might "empower" teachers exist, normally from the perspective of what the building administrator ought to do in order to increase more intense teacher participation in instructional decision making (Maeroff, 1988). Without doubt, similar further analyses will be carried out, particularly in light of the fact that proposed changes in local building governance, such as site-based management, schools of choice, and other similar suggested reform measures, will likely impact significantly on what principal are supposed to do with their teaching staffs in order to promote more effective learning by students.

While there have been numerous calls for reform which require that teachers would become more active participants in the lives of schools, there has been a remarkable absence of much discussion related to how well aspiring teachers are being made ready to step into professional roles which will call for much more than the ability to know subject matter and pedagogical theory. For the most part, reforms of teacher education have called for improvements to be made in the areas of teaching practice and subject area mastery. In addition, there is a recognition that teachers of the future will need greater awareness and skills in the area of classroom management. On the other hand, little has been said about the ways in which beginning teachers will need understanding and appreciation of school issues that go beyond immediate concern of individual classrooms. In short, little attention is being directed toward refining what teachers will need to fit into the larger context of schools. As part of this, we

have noted that few researchers have ben directing attention to the analysis of what aspiring or beginning teachers expect of the principals of schools in which they will work.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of the study described in this paper was to learn about the perceptions held by aspiring teachers regarding the role, function, and responsibilities of school principals. Our assumption is that every new and future teacher has undergone some degree of anticipatory socialization as a result of their past history as students in schools; every person going into work in a school has some sense of what teachers, administrators, and other educational personnel do because they saw these people earlier in their lives. However, we also have assumed that, unless beginning teachers have some unusual circumstances in their lives (i.e., one or more parent was a principal, a spouse was or is a principal, and so forth) the majority of aspiring teachers have not received any special instruction regarding the roles and responsibilities of administrators. Our primary goal in this study, then, was to learn what preservice teacher education candidates expected of individuals who would be their administrators in the future.

Specifically, our research has sought to identify preservice teachers' personalized definitions and expectations of the job of school principals. In addition, we wanted to know what "the principal," as an idealized role, was supposed to do to assist beginning teachers, from the perspective of individuals who had yet to assume their first teaching positions.

The questions that guided our research were:

1. What do preservice teacher education candidates believe to be the duties, functions, and responsibilities of school principals?
2. What is the basis upon which the perceptions of preservice teacher education candidates regarding school principals are founded?
3. What are the expectations held by preservice teacher education candidates for principals when the candidates assume their first teaching roles?

Design and Methodology

Data for this study came from interviews conducted of selected students currently enrolled in preservice teacher education programs leading to elementary teacher certification at a large state university. Because of the nature of certification and licensure requirements in the state in which the university is located, some of the students were classified as undergraduates, while others were classified as graduate students.

Regardless of classification, students had in common the fact that they were all older than traditional teacher education candidates; all four individuals interviewed had worked in other fields prior to returning to the university to pursue state certification as teachers. Another common characteristic of the respondents was that none had participated in their student teaching experience at the time of the interviews. On the other hand, all had recently completed what was called "cadet teaching." This certification requirement mandated that preservice candidates would be

placed into schools for periodic week-long experiences which would provide for highly structured and supervised teaching to occur.

Interviews with the four candidates began in the winter of 1994 and continued throughout the remainder of the 1993-94 academic year. These interviews are only the beginning of a longitudinal study which will document the progress of the four candidates throughout the remainder of their preservice programs and into their first years as classroom teachers.

Findings and Conclusions

The most obvious finding from the first round of interviews was the fact that preservice teacher education candidates, even when they are somewhat more mature and experienced than traditional undergraduates, are remarkably naive when it comes to their expectations and perceptions related to the role of the school principal. Knowledge and understanding of what building administrators are "supposed" to do appear to be rooted only in the anticipatory socialization process; candidates know what to expect of building administrators as a result of their observations as students enrolled in elementary and secondary schools. As a result, the principal is perceived largely as an authority figure who is mostly a distant, often unfriendly character charged mostly with matters of building maintenance and student discipline. At best, respondents suggested that good principals would be people who would find and provide resources needed by teachers, and that would be their primary duty. As one of the aspiring teachers noted,

> My idea of a good principal would be a person who opened doors by getting the kinds of instructional materials that I needed. He or she would be a person who made sure that I didn't have to deal with a lot of disruptions, rowdy kids, and the like...

Not one of the respondents referred to the ideal principal in terms often associated with a vision of the principal as an instructional leader. No one commented on an expectation that the principal would necessarily be viewed as a colleague with great instructional expertise, or serve the role of being a "head teacher" in the school. Instead, the prevailing view seemed to be that teachers in their classrooms knew how to teach and what to teach; they did not believe that principals would be able to add much to that knowledge base on a continuing basis. In this regard, one comment by one of the aspiring teachers was particularly relevant:

> In my mind, the "best" principal would be a person who welcomes you to the school...makes you feel welcome, and then lets you run your classroom the way you want. [The ideal principal] might serve as a kind of clearing-house...that is, put teachers in touch with each other so that they could swap ideas and good practices...

This limited notion of what principals are supposed to do extends also into the expectations held by the four candidates regarding what their lives will be like when they assume full-time teaching jobs. When asked what they would expect principals to do to assist them as first year teachers, they noted that they hoped that principals would orient them to their schools, operating procedures and policies, and then make certain that sufficient supplies and materials would be provided. In short, they looked at the principal as a service function to their work in classrooms. Issues such as the role of the principal in providing for staff

development, induction opportunities, ongoing formative evaluation, or even interpersonal support were not mentioned as potentially legitimate functions for principals. Instead, when these issues came up, all four respondents suggested that the source of their ongoing professional development support would come from other teachers in their schools. In short, principals were viewed as people who opened doors, made certain that supplies were available, and that bad kids were taken away. They were not valuable instructional resources in the minds of aspiring teachers.

With regard to other issues pursued related to matters such as the empowerment of classroom instructors as part of the ongoing leadership of schools, our aspiring teachers had virtually nothing to say. The notion of teachers becoming involved as members of the decision-making team of a school was not recognized as a part of what teachers are supposed to do. It was not viewed negatively or positively. Empowerment, from the perspective of those who will be working in classrooms in the next two to three years, is a non-event. The self-perceptions of the individuals that we interviewed as that they were going to be instructors who knew about their subject matter, used appropriate techniques and materials to convey that knowledge to learners, and would care about their students as individuals. In terms of broader social responsibilities in schools, aspiring teachers expressed the belief that their duty would be to make certain that the students in their care were orderly and not disruptive of the learning environment present in the schools in which they worked. Simply stated, aspiring teachers were being prepared to be teachers; they

did not want to see their worlds as partners with principals engaged in efforts to direct the improvement of the total school. On the other hand, principals were supposed to make schools into good environments where teachers could do their jobs. Although there was not a great deal of clarity regarding what principals did, from the perspective of future teachers, there was a consensus that they did something important, but it had little to do with teaching.

Implications and Discussion

The school principalship is an educational role currently seeking greater definition and description as a central role in the improvement of schools. As individual schools seek greater definition of their viability as true learning communities, it is clear that educational leaders will need to understand more clearly what they are to do, under what conditions, and with what human and other resources. In addition, as new teachers enter schools for the first time, it may be possible to promote some major transformations of what learning communities comprised of teachers, principals, students, and parents might appear to be. For this type of redefinition to occur, however, it is critical that understanding of individual roles must be increased as a way to promote more effective communication. We believe that the study presented here will assist in that type of dialogue.

There are clearly several important implications to be derived from this study which are related to the ways in which future teachers are prepared for their roles. If it is assumed that schools will be more

effective if many voices are heard as part of the instructional and school improvement process. As a result of this assumption, we have witnessed numerous calls for more involvement of local communities through the site-based management of schools, greater accountability, and opportunities for teachers and other staff members to participate more actively in school activities. We do not dispute these claims for strategies to be used in schools. What we see, however, is some evidence that the rhetoric of reform may be ahead of the ways in which people are ready to step into new roles and responsibilities. Teachers are still being prepared largely as technicians in their classrooms. They are being made ready to instruct students, control behavior, and engage in highly individualistic tasks which have been part of teaching behavior for hundreds of years. For the most part, little attention seems to be directed in preservice teacher preparation programs to making people ready to see their roles as part of schoolwide efforts. While a good deal of attention has recently been directed at the ways in which teachers ought to be prepared (Sarason, Davidson, & Blatt, 1986; Goodlad, 1990; The Holmes Group, 1989; Carnegie Foundation, 1986), most of that discourse has been directed toward an analysis of the ways in which individuals might be made more technically proficient in their work. Our purpose is certainly not to dispute the recommendations of numerous reformers who have questioned if people know enough to teach properly, and if they know how to teach properly. Rather, we ask here whether or not current approaches to the preparation of classroom educators are going to make people ready to assume the many other

duties that will be expected of teachers in schools of the next century. Is it enough, for example, to prepare people to do a better job of going into their classrooms and shutting the door behind them? We think not.

When further studies into the issue of teachers' perceptions of their readiness to assume non-instructional duties are carried out, we suspect that we will gain additional insights into the ways in which teachers are comfortable with their opportunities to engage in systematic decision making on a schoolwide basis. Part of that additional preservice training might involve looking more intensely at who principals are and what they do so that new teachers are not guided solely by assumptions and understandings brought to their jobs from their days as elementary and secondary school students alone. We also believe that findings from research such as the material presented here has the potential of informing practice on the part of those who are involved with the preservice preparation of future principals. It seems clear that simply indicating to new principals that they have a responsibility to "empower teachers" and involve others in the decision-making processes of their schools carries with it a responsibility to ensure that those who are empowered and involved have some appreciation of what is going on in the larger school environment. Principals bear some critical responsibility in helping to socialize their new teaching colleagues so that long-standing beliefs about the principal serving only as a disciplinarian and resource-gatherer may be dispelled.

An additional practical implication derived from our work might be

that, as school districts and states move toward new requirements for induction and entry year programs to assist beginning educators proceed more effectively into their new assignments (Huling-Austin, Odell, Ishler, Kay, & Edelfelt, 1989; Brooks, 1987), it will become increasingly important to provide valid information to inform those who would lead these induction efforts. Principals will continue to lead support programs for new teachers at the school site level. Providing these administrators with insights into expectations held for their roles should assist the induction process for many.

Finally, we believe that the findings of this research will add to the knowledge base related to the phenomenon of anticipatory socialization as it occurs in educational settings. We appreciate the fact that an interview study involving only a handful of individual at one institution is hardly powerful enough to yield findings that are conclusive at this point. However, we believe that our work presented here has the potential for serving as an important starting point to guide additional future work in the field. As the issue of preservice teachers' perceptions of principals is examined more fully, we anticipate that increasingly clear pictures of how teachers might work effectively as true partners in schoolwide improvement processes will emerge.

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